Entertaining with wine - part one

9 Dec 2006 by JR

Quantities

A tricky one, this. Individuals' capacity for alcohol varies enormously, as you have doubtless observed yourself. No-one could possibly accuse a host who provided his or her guests with the equivalent of a bottle of wine a head over the course of an evening of meanness. And yet there are some occasions, a weekday lunch, for example, at which it would be extremely sophisticated to provide one stunning bottle (of champagne or white burgundy perhaps) for six people, allowing them each one generous glassful of luxury but minimizing the dangerous snooze factor of a bibulous lunch.

As a general rule, an average of between half and a bottle a head consumed over several hours at a table makes for a very jolly occasion. If there are many drivers in the party then total consumption should be much less. See member's forum

for a lively discussion of this.

Wine served without a meal is potentially much more potent, especially before lunch when most bodies contain little food to buffer alcohol's effect. A quarter of a bottle a head, or two small glasses, could well be enough if there is a significant proportion of abstainers in the group. However, for a long daytime reception such as a wedding it would be safer to allow half a bottle a head (and as much as a bottle for an all-evening event). If you're placing a large order, most suppliers will allow sale or return.

Liquids and solids without alcohol

Like many hosts, I frequently overlook the non-alcoholic drinks in my concern to serve just the right wine(s). Try to serve as much water as wine at the table, and to provide a reasonably sophisticated non-alcoholic alternative at parties such as fizzy mineral water with fresh orange juice or a drop of elderflower syrup, or spiced tomato juice cocktails before lunch. The most delicious non alcoholic drink I can remember being served was at a book launch hosted by Anabella Bower. She had prepared a concoction which included cucumber and strawberries for which the recipe is in her English food book that

was really refreshing, aromatic and non-cloying.

It makes sense not to drink on an empty stomach. Serving something to eat cuts down quite dramatically on the intoxication rate of an alcoholic aperitif. Eating olives out of doors (the only time I encourage my children to throw stones) can seem just right, but they are distractingly mediterranean and a bit too strongly flavoured for a northern wine like champagne. Radishes, celery, pistachio nuts and quail's eggs are less intrusive, but most of these involve some potentially inconvenient detritus (although halves of quail's egg on a dollop of mayonnaise on toasted rounds of French bread are easy to eat and

look glamorous). Little cheesy biscuits, such as the Dutch Roka brand or Fudges' cheese straws, complement most wines, as do Italian breadsticks or *grissini*, even with prosciutto wound round them. I also love salted, sauteed almonds although they can leave fingers pretty greasy.

More follows on specific types of entertaining and parties later in the week.